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## *About this Journal*

Innovations and Critical Issues in Teaching and Learning is a peer-reviewed journal that provides research-based discussion of innovations and critical issues related to teaching and learning in the 21st century. Innovations and Critical Issues in Teaching and Learning publishes articles that: apply research to practice, review literature on a relevant and timely topic, and are theoretical.

# *Innovations and Critical Issues in Teaching and Learning*

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# *Developing Word Consciousness in Young Readers*


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## Abstract

Developing word consciousness in young readers can help motivate them to learn new words, make personal connections to words, and in turn, use words more skillfully. Word consciousness can also enable students to grow their vocabulary knowledge and improve their comprehension skills in order to become better readers. It is essential for the teacher to present words in a way that will get students excited about words and promote word consciousness. Additionally, students need to be immersed in an environment that is filled with words. Further, the words should be presented through rich, teacher-led strategies that engage students in communicating and listening. Strategies and approaches to help students develop an awareness, interest, and love for words are described.


*Keywords:* word consciousness, vocabulary, comprehension

Word consciousness is defined as having an awareness and interest in words and their meanings (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). Developing word consciousness in young readers is critical in order to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge and support comprehension (Neugebauer et al., 2017). According to Neuman and Wright (2014), "without vocabulary knowledge, words are just words-without much meaning" (p. 3). As such, it is essential for teachers to implement strategies and use structured routines, such as teaching students about words and using wordplay, in order to promote word consciousness (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008), because learning words requires a variety of opportunities for students to understand the meaning of a word (Bromley, 2007). Further, helping students to become word conscious is an important aspect of instruction (Lane & Allen, 2010), because creating opportunities to enhance students' vocabulary can also build upon their reading comprehension (Barger, 2006). Therefore, getting students interested in and excited about words is essential to the effectiveness of reading instruction (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). In order for students to get excited about words and for vocabulary instruction to work, students must be actively involved (Towell, 1997).

**Word Consciousness and the Learning Environment**

An environment that is rich with words influences a child's opportunity to read, hear, use, and talk about new vocabulary words (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). Immersing students in an environment that is rich in words with instruction and word-learning strategies provides greater breadth and depth in developing more vocabulary knowledge (Baumann, Ware, & Edwards, 2007). For example, when vocabulary lessons are integrated into interventions, the students' vocabularies grow more than expected (Baumann et al., 2007). Accordingly, developing an environment that encourages word learning is important for promoting word consciousness and it is essential that teachers encourage their students'

vocabulary knowledge by implementing strategies and tools in the classroom that support and build upon word consciousness (Baumann et al., 2007). Intentionally creating such an environment and using such strategies has been shown to increase students' vocabulary knowledge, which can assist in closing the wide differences in vocabulary knowledge among school-aged children (Neugebauer et al., 2017).

Teaching vocabulary in early childhood is critical in order for children to develop a large, enriched vocabulary that can be pivotal in students becoming better readers (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Specific strategies for teaching vocabulary in early childhood include reinforcing students' words, acknowledging students' words through positive recognition, and guiding students to make personal connections to words through teacher talk (Neugebauer et al., 2017). All of these approaches can positively affect students' general vocabulary knowledge (Neugebauer et al., 2017). Further, incidental learning of words, along with explicit instruction and deliberate modeling of sophisticated vocabulary, can provide breadth to the students' vocabulary (Lane & Allen, 2010). Thus, creating a word-rich environment in the physical space in the classroom is important for vocabulary development in young readers (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). Additionally, using wordplay by having a classroom filled with games and giving time to play such games is a tool that allows opportunities to foster word consciousness (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008).

**Promoting Word Consciousness**

Being a word conscious teacher can encourage word consciousness in young readers (Lane & Allen, 2010), because enthusiasm is contagious and teachers that are passionate about words often unintentionally share that enthusiasm with their students (Bromley, 2007). Therefore, teachers should foster student participation in vocabulary activities and hold students

accountable for learning words and their meanings (Manyak et al., 2014). Further, it is important to have follow-up encounters with words and allow for plenty of time to review such words in order for them to become a part of the students' vocabulary (Neuman & Roskos, 2012). Hence, it is critical teachers are given continuing professional development on strategies that are effective in order to promote word consciousness, enhance students' vocabulary knowledge, and support their comprehension. This professional development should focus on supporting a teacher's ability to be word conscious and providing vocabulary instruction that is planned, sequenced, and systematic (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe strategies and tools that teachers can use to create an environment that supports the development of word consciousness.

## Review of Literature

### Defining Word Consciousness

Word consciousness has been defined in varying ways. For example, Neugebauer and colleagues (2017) define word consciousness as instruction that promotes students' excitement and attention to words. Similarly, other scholars have defined word consciousness as being aware of words and their meanings and having an interest in words and their meanings (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). Additionally, a deeper definition of word consciousness includes noticing how and when new words are being used (Manzo & Manzo, 2008). Furthermore, word consciousness combines metacognition about words, a desire to learn words, and a yawning interest to learn words that doesn't end (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008).

**Vocabulary's Impact on Comprehension**

Vocabulary is the knowledge of words and their meanings (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Honig, Diamond, Cole, & Gutlohn, 2008). Word consciousness is a key component of vocabulary because of the integration of metacognition and the motivation to learn words (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). Additionally, vocabulary knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension, which relates to the ability to understand written content (Davis, 1972; Thorndike, 1917). Comprehension of text is more likely for children that have had early exposure to more vocabulary because they know the meaning of more words (Wright, 2014). Comprehension and vocabulary have a reciprocal relationship, because a larger vocabulary often leads to greater comprehension, and better comprehension leads to the learning of more and more vocabulary words (Stanovich, 1986).

**Promoting Word Consciousness Through Vocabulary Instruction**

Words can be complex, because, among other things, words have synonyms, antonyms, multiple meanings, homophones, and homonyms. Therefore, teachers and students have much to consider and comprehend related to vocabulary (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012). Vocabulary is learned through repeated exposure to new words and learners need to encounter a vocabulary word between six to sixteen times before they can remember it (Ur, 2012). Additionally, to broaden a student's vocabulary and promote word consciousness, teachers should intentionally model sophisticated vocabulary (Lane & Allen, 2010). For example, teachers can use familiar words and then change the words to more advanced words (Lane & Allen, 2010), immerse students in a vocabulary-rich environment, and provide instruction in words and strategies for how to learn those words (Baumann et al., 2007). When students have a range of experiences with words, their expressive often vocabulary increases (Baumann et al.,

2007). More specifically, when words are presented in a way that makes sense to students, it affords them the best chance of learning (Neuman & Roskos, 2012), because knowledge of word meanings is a strong predictor of reading comprehension (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).

In order to further enhance vocabulary instruction four pragmatic principles should be used. The pragmatic principles include: (1) establishing rich routines, (2) providing review experiences, (3) responding directly to student confusion, and (4) fostering universal participation and accountability (Manyak et al., 2014). The use of these principles can have a positive impact on vocabulary knowledge when used in connection with a word wall (Manyak et al., 2014). In addition, using complex, coherent text sets can build students' vocabulary (Cervetti, Wright, & Hwang, 2016).

**Developing Young Readers' Vocabularies**

Increasing students' knowledge of words beyond the words that are explicitly taught and finding ways to develop their excitement for and awareness of words is imperative for the development of the vocabularies of young learners (Neugebauer et al., 2017). For example, teacher talk, which is defined as teachers' everyday language and student-teacher exchanges, can be used to make personal connections with the text to promote student interest and attention to the words (Neugebauer et al., 2017). Using teacher talk can also engage young students and evoke their participation in shared reading, before, during, and after, which improves literacy growth (Gonzalez et al., 2014). Another approach that can support students' language skills is for teachers to allow wait times of three to ten seconds within their teacher talk in order to allow time for students to process the information (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). Further, repetition of words and providing positive feedback through teacher talk is another way to increase vocabulary knowledge in students (Neugebauer et al., 2017). Finally, the length of any teacher

questioning is notably related to vocabulary development because the duration of the questioning encourages active participation with meaningful gains in both vocabulary and comprehension (Gonzalez et al., 2014).

Opportunities for students to practice skill work, such as speaking, writing, retelling stories, role playing, rewriting texts, and group work activities, are also important for supporting vocabulary development (Ur, 2012). Students need opportunities to talk by being asked open-ended questions in order to get practice for how to reply with more than one-word answers (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). The more time students spend on vocabulary encourages more generative talk, which allows the students to initiate ideas and creates more connections with words and gives meaning to words (Sparapani, Calisle, & Conner, 2018). These opportunities to encourage vocabulary development can occur in a variety of ways.

### *Using Informational Text*

For lifelong learning and success in school, informational texts that are read aloud is the most opportune time in the school day to develop vocabulary for young learners (Wright, 2014). Observations also have shown informational texts read aloud generate vocabulary curiosity and excitement in young learners (Wright, 2014). In order for there to be vocabulary development in early childhood, teachers should use explicit and implicit instruction, with explicit instruction having greater impact than implicit (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

### *Understanding and Teaching Morphological Awareness*

Students that are provided the tools to understand word structures can significantly assist with learning vocabulary (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). Morphology is the study of the structure of words, which children develop an awareness of during their early childhood (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). Therefore, instruction in morphological awareness can be combined with vocabulary

instruction (Ramirez, Walton, & Roberts, 2014). Students' morphological awareness can increase when teachers enact effective strategies for early vocabulary development (Ramirez et al., 2014). Students that have a greater understanding of morphology, tend to have greater vocabularies (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). Teachers should focus attention on the relationships among words, such as their common roots, prefixes, and suffixes, to support word consciousness (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007). Therefore, when students come to a word and they don't know what it means, students can use the word-part clues to help break a word down into its meaning (Baumann, Ware, & Edwards, 2007).

### *Vocabulary Development Through Play*

In order to boost students' vocabularies, incorporating play into instruction is essential (Barger, 2006). Students will become independent word learners if teachers make learning words as much fun as possible by motivating and involving students in fun activities (Towell, 1997). Teachers that have a classroom of games and allow time for students to play those games is a way to incorporate fun and challenging classroom experiences with learning words ( Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008), Also, instruction with adult-supported play-based activities, as in when adults actively incorporate vocabulary into play with story-related toys, shows beneficial results on early vocabulary growth because learning through play makes student's learning a joy (Toub et al., 2018). Teachers should take time to play with their students in order to give them the support they need to maximize the benefits of games as an educational tool (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008).

### *Promoting Word Consciousness*

Words are tools that can be used for communicating and teachers need to have knowledge of the language to support students' learning (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Teachers

that encourage word consciousness for students in their classroom provide them with opportunities to learn more advanced vocabularies that enable them to support their own reading comprehension (Lane & Allen, 2010). Therefore, the best way to promote word consciousness in students is for teachers to be word conscious (Lane & Allen, 2010) and to provide a word-rich environment for them in the classroom (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008).

## Promoting Word Consciousness in the Classroom

Words are essential for reading and communicating. Students should have experiences in the classroom that make learning about words interesting and purposeful. However, there may be challenges when attempting to get students excited and interested in words, which is often due to students not knowing as many words (Neuman & Wright, 2014), and having a limited vocabulary (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). If words have never been presented to the students in an exciting way, they may just see them as words. If students are presented new words, and rarely see those words again, they will likely be forgotten because they are not word sponges, and they are unable to learn words from hearing them just one time (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Students need to encounter a vocabulary word between six and sixteen times before they remember it (Ur, 2012). Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide a classroom environment that promotes words often and, in order to truly learn the vocabulary words, real experiences and routines need to be put into the students' daily learning.

### Approaches for Promoting Word Consciousness

Students need to be afforded opportunities to learn, practice, and communicate vocabulary words in an environment that promotes word consciousness (Lane & Allen, 2010). The Framework of Five, a set of five recommendations, provides guidance for teachers on specific instructional actions that can be taken to support word consciousness in their own

classrooms. The Framework of Five is made up of the following recommendations: (1) foster enthusiasm for words (Neugebauer, et al., 2017), (2) introduce vocabulary words with pictures or graphic interchange formats (GIFs) and include synonyms and antonyms (Neuman & Wright, 2014), (3) model and incorporate rich conversations, (Neuman & Wright, 2014), (4) offer many word walls with opportunities for review (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008), and (5) provide word games (Baumann et al., 2007). Teachers who utilize approaches that promote word consciousness should incorporate them into their students' daily learning.

***Foster Enthusiasm for Words***

The first step in getting students excited about words is presenting the words with enthusiasm. Consider how intimidated a young student that is learning to read might feel when being shown a list of vocabulary words with nothing else. If a list of words, or even one word, is shown to students, is talked about briefly, and then is not shown to them for a long period of time, the word(s) are often forgotten if a visual has not been presented and if the students are not even asked to say the word(s) (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

One way to assist students in learning new vocabulary words is for the teacher to present them in a powerful way (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). The tone of the teacher's voice and the teacher's body language can influence a student's engagement. That is, how teachers say words and present them when introducing new words can captivate students from the beginning (Lane & Allen, 2010). Teacher word consciousness talk is essential in understanding the impact of promoting word consciousness (Neugebauer, et al., 2017). For example, when the teacher is about to introduce a new word or words to students, he/she may say, "First grade learners, it is our lucky day. I have something exciting to show you. We are going to look at some new vocabulary words that you are going to be able incorporate in your everyday language."

Additionally, silent signals can be created to show excitement. For example, a teacher can extend both arms and lift them to the sky and bring them back down. A teacher might also open his/her mouth as though gasping and put their hands on their cheeks to show anxiousness. After the teacher states the opening, in order to engage the students, the teacher can initiate one of these silent signals and the students would replicate what the teacher is doing.

***Use Images to Introduce Word***

A second way to assist students in learning a new vocabulary word is to go beyond looking at the word and saying it, by adding images to the presentation. New vocabulary words should be selected intentionally (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Then, a picture or a GIF can be used to provide an image for students to either connect their prior knowledge or give them an image in their mind of what the word means. Next, the definition of the word should be provided and read to the students. The students then read the definition with the teacher. Along with the word's definition, a synonym and antonym for the word should be displayed. This enforces the meaning of the word and allows students to consider if they are familiar with the word's synonym or its antonym.

***Model and Encourage Rich Conversation***

Students should be given the opportunity to engage in conversations in the classroom in order to actively participate in conversations outside of the classroom (Neuman & Wright, 2014), because they need practice using more than one word when speaking and to use complete sentences. This should be started at a young age and can be incorporated into the students' new vocabulary development in the classroom (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

After a new word has been introduced, along with its picture, synonym, and antonym, students need an opportunity to use the word. This can be done through rich conversations.

Calling on one or two students to use the word in a sentence does not afford the whole class the opportunity to use the word. Nor does each of them just saying the word in a sentence and not being held accountable for the proper use of the word. In order for students to use the new vocabulary word and to be held accountable for using it correctly, a deeper conversation needs to take place. In this type of conversation, students are expected to address their classmates before speaking and use the vocabulary word in a complete sentence. The listener then needs to respond in a complete sentence. They are expected to use words to show they agree or ask a follow up question, along with stating the name of whom they are replying to in their sentence.

In the classroom, teachers should model what a causal conversation looks, sounds, and feels like for the students. If applicable, they should try to model using personal connections that relate to the class. For example, the teacher might select a word to teach like *fit*, as in good health due to exercising. The teacher would then call up one student to assist in modeling. Next, the teacher and student should stand in front of the class, but face each other. Their feet are expected to be turned to each other and to use eye contact. The teacher should then face the student and say the student's name. "Linda, at recess I noticed you climbed from one end of the monkey bars to the other. You are so *fit*." Linda may say, "It is so fun to play on the monkey bars, Mrs. Carr." After, Linda gets to use the word *fit* in a complete sentence. She may say, "Mrs. Carr, I am *fit* because I ride my bike." To which, the teacher may reply, "I love riding bike too, Linda! It really helps me to stay *fit*."

From here, the teacher should tell the students they have a few moments to think about the word. After that, a reminder should be given that they have one minute along with the cue to turn to their partners and engage in a casual conversation about the vocabulary word in a whispered tone. Meanwhile, the teacher should choose one of the partners and listen in to ensure

they are following expectations. If needed, the teacher can provide encouragement and ideas to the pair, being sure to allow wait time, time for them to find the word they want, before providing prompts. Next, the teacher should ask who would like to share their casual conversation. A pair is chosen and they face each other. Finally, the teacher should remind the class the pair may need some wait time for retelling their casual conversation and to allow them that time by being an attentive audience that partakes through listening respectfully.

***Create an Interactive Word Wall***

Teachers should create word walls that are regularly and actively used for instruction (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008). However, putting words on a wall and never referring to them again is not a productive way to afford students multiple encounters with a word. The teacher can have multiple word walls in the classroom, and use a portion of the whiteboard in the front of the room to put the words that are currently being used in a lesson or unit for the entirety of the lesson/unit. After the lesson/unit is complete, the words are then put on their correct wall. Three types of suggested word walls are a math vocabulary wall, a reading vocabulary wall, and a vocabulary wall for words that are a part of a weekly vocabulary lesson. The word cards should also have pictures on them to match the word. When the teacher adds new words to a specific vocabulary wall, the teacher should do this with the students. As the teacher places the words on the applicable wall, the students should then repeat the teacher in a chant, where the word is said three times. The teacher should then proceed to do this two more times, for a total of the teacher saying the word nine times and the students chanting it nine times.

Another way the teacher can incorporate the word walls is by going on sporadic walks throughout the day. In the middle of a lesson or while students are having independent work time, the teacher may start saying a chant, “Walking, walking, so we can go talking.” When the

class hears this, they stop what they are doing, join in on the chant, and begin to walk around the room. When they hear the teacher say freeze or synonyms to freeze, such as stop or halt, they know to find the closest person to them. Students know a partnership is made when the two students are facing each other with their feet toward one another and they are making direct eye contact. Students that do not have a partner continue walking and find a student that is also still walking. After all partnerships are made, the teacher should choose a word from one of the word walls. The teacher should point to it and says the word and the students repeat the word. The teacher should then model how to use the word in a complete sentence and reminds students they are expected to use casual conversations. As such, they use each other's names and show they are listening to each other by giving a response. They should once again be reminded they get one minute and are to use a whisper when communicating. After the minute, one group shares their casual conversation. After the activity is complete, the teacher should begin a new chant that indicates to students the activity is over and to continue what they were previously working on.

***Use Games***

Games help students to learn, practice, and get excited about words. Using board games or words games that are already established and the teacher putting their own spin on them is supportive in engaging students and in exposing them to and helping them learn new words. A sample of games are provided discussing the benefits of developing word consciousness.

**Kaboom!** Something as simple as choosing a stick from a cup and getting to read the word on the stick is exciting for students. It can be made into a game by students keeping the word they say correctly but having to return the word they say incorrectly. This replicates the

game *Kaboom*! There are also sticks that have the word Kaboom on them. If a student draws a stick that has Kaboom, he/she has to return all his/her sticks to the cup.

**Would You Rather.** The board game *Would You Rather*, offers two scenarios and a game player is expected to make choices. The teacher can use a PowerPoint to show students a new vocabulary word and its antonym. The students are then shown two spaces in the classroom. As a slide is introduced, the teacher models if she would rather be or feel the introduced vocabulary word, the teacher would walk to one of the designated spots. Or, if the teacher feels the antonym of the vocabulary word, she would walk to the other spot. The teacher should then remind students that they need to have a reason for why they made their choice and that they will need to use casual conversation with a partner to share support for their reasoning.

**Charades.** *Charades* is a game in which a student acts out a word or phrase and his/her teammates are expected to guess the word or phrase. It can be useful to have students collaborate with each other to come up with actions for a word. The student is then expected to use the action when they state the word. For example, students may pretend like they are swimming for the word *fit*. So now, when anyone says *fit* in relation to exercising, they have to pretend to move their arms in a swimming motion.

**Pictionary.** *Pictionary* is a game where students have to guess the picture that is drawn by their teammates. The teacher can do a version of that where the students *Sketch and Share*. Students are given a scenario with a few different vocabulary words. They have to choose at least one word to sketch. For example, if the words are *amaze*, *powerful*, and *decision*, the teacher may say that they are to pretend they are going to the circus and they need to use one or all the words to sketch a picture of what they see at the circus. After a given amount of time, they

share their sketches with the students at their table using the vocabulary words in complete sentences. This approach can be used to assess students' understanding of a word.

## Discussion

Developing word consciousness in young readers is critical in order to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and support comprehension (Neugebauer et al., 2017). This can be done in a variety of ways, but immersing students in an environment that is rich in words, instruction, and word learning strategies provides an important foundation (Baumann, et al., 2007).

Teachers can support word consciousness in their classrooms by utilizing strategies and approaches described in the previous section. For example, when teachers provide a powerful presentation of words by exposing students to multiple vocabulary encounters, modeling the use of the word, and then engaging them to make connections with the words, teachers can foster enthusiasm about word learning (Lane & Allen, 2010). Additionally, when teachers introduce vocabulary words with pictures and GIFs, it provides instruction and strategies for how to learn words (Baumann et al., 2007). Using a vocabulary word's synonyms and antonyms in teaching the word, allows the teacher to use multiple reference points and allows the students to see multiple words that may be familiar to them and, therefore, the students can be exposed to more advanced words (Lane & Allen, 2010). Introducing vocabulary words using these structured routines will permit the students to establish rich routines and allow for the teacher to respond to any confusion during the vocabulary instruction (Manyak et al., 2014).

Vocabulary is learned through repeated exposure to a new word (Campbell & Xerri, 2016). A child's curiosity and interest in gathering new words shows they are developing word consciousness (Barger, 2006). With the use of the strategies and approaches in the previous section, teachers are able to repeat vocabulary words in a variety of ways in order to foster that

curiosity and interest in young students. Additionally, the use of the Framework of Five can help teachers engage young readers in a word-rich environment with ample opportunities for them to make personal connections to the words being taught, which promotes word consciousness among the young readers (Neugebauer et al., 2017). The approaches given are a start for teachers to develop word consciousness in their classrooms. It is vital that teachers infuse ways to provide a word-rich environment (Graves &Watts-Taffe, 2008) that affords students opportunities to become word conscious in order to enhance their vocabulary knowledge, which in turns supports their comprehension (Davis, 1972; Thorndike, 1917).

Comprehension and vocabulary have a corresponding relationship in the sense that a greater vocabulary leads to greater comprehension, and better comprehension leads to the learning of more and more vocabulary words (Stanovich, 1986). Utilizing these strategies to develop word consciousness will afford students opportunities to become excited about words, which can improve their vocabulary knowledge and, as result, develop their comprehension skills. The more words a student knows, the more likely the student will comprehend a text because the more exposure they have to vocabulary, the more they know the meaning of the word (Wright, 2014). Also, students in a word-rich environment are often encouraged to use more generative talk (Sparapani et al., 2018) and learn and comprehend words incidentally due to explicit instruction (Lane & Allen, 2010).

In order to support teachers in developing word consciousness in young readers, ongoing professional development is essential in order enhance their students' love of words. Evidence shows that children need vocabulary instruction and, consequently, ongoing professional development is essential to bringing such instruction to the classroom (Neuman & Wright, 2014). There appears to be a gap in the existing knowledge of developing word consciousness. A

number of studies have been done on vocabulary and its importance to comprehension (e.g. Davis, 1972; Stanovich, 1986; Thorndike, 1917; Wright, 2014). However, in order for students to learn more vocabulary words, teachers need to be properly trained on not only the importance of word consciousness, but the strategies and approaches that support their learning environment.

## Conclusion

Teachers can implement the ideas presented in this article in many ways that are applicable to promoting word consciousness in the classroom. Teachers should consider using a variety of ways to promote word consciousness, such as presenting words with enthusiasm, using images, requiring rich conversations, providing word walls, and using word games to encourage word consciousness with their students. Students should be immersed in a word-rich environment and provided ample opportunities to see words, listen to words, speak words, and use words, which will help to build upon their knowledge of vocabulary words and their uses. Beyond being excited and having a yawning desire to learn words, being able to read words is the ultimate goal. Affording students an interest and awareness in words will help them to become intrinsic word learners. As a teacher, having excited and curious learners who want to know what a new word means indicates the student is developing word consciousness. Such excitement from students signifies that they understand a word is not just a word, but that a word has meaning.

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# *Utilizing Mirrors and Windows in Elementary Literacy to Build Identity and Empathy*


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A Minnesota-transplant, Hannah is originally from West Des Moines, Iowa, and brings with her previous teaching experiences from Houston, Texas, and Overland Park, Kansas. After graduating from Iowa State University with a degree in Elementary Education, Hannah realized that literacy reform was a pressing issue across the board. This led her to pursue a master's degree in Reading at Minnesota State University, Mankato the following year. When she's not teaching, you can find Hannah reading, hosting a dinner party, or taking a walk around Lake Harriet.




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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to establish a purpose for mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990) in the modern elementary context. This article will explore the way in which identity, motivation, and empathy are established through connections and contrasts students make with texts. Teachers are encouraged to branch out of traditionally homogenous literature to foster classroom community and reach for equity. Teachers and practitioners will find a list of original-voice texts featuring racially and culturally diverse characters to guide them in their journey to equity.


*Keywords:*

Mirrors: Texts wherein a student can connect with the story, a character, or an event. Mirror texts seem to mimic or "mirror" student's life experiences or thoughts.

Windows: Texts that present a view different from a student's life. Window texts show students what other people's experiences and thoughts might be.

Original Voice: indicates that the author is a person who belongs to the cultural or racial group featured in the book. Original voice validates a text by ensuring authentic representation of individuals.

In a time when teachers are increasingly focusing on culturally responsive practices and closing opportunity gaps, a deeper, consistent connection between students and the curriculum is needed. "Mirrors" and "windows" can provide this bridge. Rudine Sims Bishop defines mirrors as children's books in which students see themselves reflected, in which they personally connect to the texts (Bishop, 1990). Mirrors can connect content and students, because students can establish a deeper sense of self, belonging, and identity through reading mirror texts. Conversely, windows provide students an opportunity to expand their horizons and learn about others (Bishop, 1990; Allan, 2016). Learning about others can solidify students' understanding of themselves even further by providing a wider, global context for their own identity (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014; Masko & Bloem, 2017). Children have a basic need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within their community; mirrors and windows effectively work towards this goal by showing students how their experiences are simultaneously reflected in the lives of others and made unique in comparison to others.

Texts providing windows and mirrors are integral to students' feeling of belonging in a community, strengthen children's foundation of their own identity, and increase their compassion for others (Turner & Kim, 2005). A sense of belonging in a community can initiate some of the most critical skills for students' reading success, namely increased motivation and engagement (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). Because reading proficiency is necessary for success in other academic areas, and ultimately, career success (Jones, Barnes, Baily, & Doolittle, 2017), all teachers should be actively seeking mirror and window texts for

their students as an essential equity practice (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017).

Recognizing this need for mirror texts, teachers must also remember that mirror text selection should not simply be a matter of identifying the child's race or presumed culture and finding books to accompany it (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Rather, the teacher should aim to attend to students' self-identification and reading preferences. Teachers should be mindful that their male students might connect more deeply with Wonder Woman than Superman depending on their conscious or subconscious gender identity and play preferences. A student who identifies as biracial or multiracial might identify more with one racial group than the other. The details of a child's identity are critical for true connection to reading experiences; broad categories like "black children" and "Asian children" are incomplete. There will likely be stories that students connect with that will surprise teachers. This is because no one teacher can truly know a student's full identity or story, but rather the student should be given the opportunity through literature to reveal it to the teacher themselves (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). This can be done through conversations and activities surrounding literature, which is discussed in the table below.

In many cases, books including racially and culturally diverse characters can be used in place of essentially any curriculum texts that may be required in a school district. For example, character study traditionally done with chapter books like *Magic Tree House* could be done with *The Stories Julian Tells* to highlight a black child's experiences with his family and imagination. This is an important

replacement practice because many literacy curriculum resources provide predominantly white, middle-class children's books. Replacing these ethnocentric texts with texts that represent a wider range identities and lived experiences can accomplish the same educational goals while being more inclusive to members of the classroom community. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to establish reasons for using mirrors and windows and equip teachers with specific texts they can use immediately in their own classrooms.

## Review of Literature

### *Texts as Windows and Mirrors*

Both mirrors and windows are not only a necessity, but also an inherent right each child has. Mirrors show students stories they can relate to and affirm their belonging to a particular group or space where the story is shared (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Windows might expose students to new, unfamiliar experiences or may show a familiar experience through the lens of someone with a different identity. The balance of these two categories is what brings students in a classroom community closer together. This kind of balance requires an awareness of which students are connecting deeply with teachers' literature selections and which students are learning about others through them. An appropriate balance would allow for all students to regularly experience both mirrors and windows.

Texts that serve as mirrors and windows should not be optional. Rather, using texts as windows and mirrors honors students' identities and provides more inclusive teaching. While this has been a hotly debated topic in the United States,

the International Literacy Association asserts, "Children have a right to read texts that mirror their experiences and languages, provide windows into the lives of others, and open doors into our diverse world." (International Literacy Association, 2018). Indeed, when these texts are absent, members of a classroom community are often excluded. There is a need for active participation through connections, discussions, and reflection in literacy communities in order for students to grow as readers (Turner & Kim, 2005). This focus on community has become the heart of literacy reforms, because one of *the* best ways to encourage active participation around books is to include mirror and window books that provide the entry point for connections to personal experiences (Turner & Kim, 2005).

### *Texts as Mirrors*

Students have a right to read texts in which they see their own race, their ethnicity, their cultural traditions, their gender identity, or their familial patterns. Children are often able to connect with a text personally when they are able to see themselves in a text (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). Reading about characters and events that are familiar to them can also help students build a positive cultural and racial identity, which can increase personal motivation (Marinak & Gambrell, 2016). Considerable evidence suggests that when students have access to mirrors in their classrooms, they are not only more successful readers, they are more motivated readers who are more proficient across all subjects (Marinak & Gambrell, 2016; Miles & Stipek, 2006). When access to mirror

texts is lacking, students can begin to question their belonging within the classroom, impacting success in all academic areas (DeLeón , 2002).

Teachers should be careful not to make swift, shallow judgments about mirror texts for their students. Students' mirrors should be as they view themselves, not as the teachers and peers view them, meaning that teachers need to provide opportunities for students to share that self-identification with them. For example, asking, "Which characters do you connect with? Why?" Teachers should avoid using books about "Latinx" people or "Black people" to mirror entire racial groups. Rather, teachers should search for books about specific groups, such as Ecuadorian families, South African families, or Nepalese families (DeLeón, 2002). Ideally, students will be the ones telling teachers which books they find to be a mirror for them. The most authentic and natural identity is that which the students claim for themselves. After practicing discussions around identity, students should be given opportunities to write about themselves and their experiences. This will not only help them establish these connections they are learning about themselves, but also to help the teacher understand them better, which will aid them in text selection. Because this process is a year-long endeavor, teachers must actively create ways to lead conversations around identity and connections to text.

Mirror texts validate students' experiences and identity as natural and shared by others (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). When teachers do not provide these mirrors, they promote an omissive viewpoint of that group, essentially leaving them out (DeLeón, 2002). This ommision not only damages the groups that are

missing out on their mirrors, but also overrepresented students (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

While it may seem that the overrepresented, typically white students, are set up for success due to the abundance of mirrors available to them in children's texts today, many are actually at risk for extreme ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism promotes an over-inflated sense of cultural importance and ignorance among groups (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Essentially, ethnocentrism is the juxtaposition students of color experience through the white-washed children's literature many teachers use today. Ethnocentrism damages both parties in this way as students of color are implicitly displayed as less important, while white students are subconsciously bolstered through an excessive amount of mirrors. This is dangerous for white students as it overinflates the role of white and European groups' importance while diminishing the importance of others, which leads to empathy disparity and a lack of connection with others. Windows can counter the ethnocentrism teachers and their students often experience in their classrooms.

### *Texts as Windows*

Due to the structure of the social landscape in America and resulting racial segregation, many students may find that books are the only places they encounter people who are different from them (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). These segregated life experiences are a massive deficit in American classrooms, because when students read texts about people who are different from them, they expand their social-emotional skills, compassion, and self-understanding (Masko & Bloem, 2017).

When working to foster authentic windows, original voice from the author critical. The "OwnVoices" movement in 2015 led a charge for authenticity in storytelling. Proponents argues that the text should be written from a person who belongs to the racial or cultural group described. This idea, referred to as "cultural authenticity," helps maintain the integrity of the stories told. Many of our students read stories that show white people's impressions of their race or culture (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). This not only misrepresents many groups but perpetuates a white mindset and middle-class themes, effectively destroying the purpose of windows entirely (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008). As Jacqueline Woodson describes, after consistently experiencing white people's perspectives of black people's experiences, she realized, "I realized that no one but me can tell my story." (Woodson, 1998). Just as each author gets to tell their story, children can see their story in combinations of author's books. Children cannot be expected to develop positive self-identity and interpersonal skills if they are not equipped with culturally accurate stories.

### *Effects of Windows and Mirrors*

The benefits from mirrors and windows are clear and undeniable, with implications for success that span far beyond reading at grade-level (Turner & Kim, 2005; Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009; DeLeón, 2002). While reading narratives, movement systems and physical sensation receptors fire in readers' brains, indicating that readers neurologically place themselves in the role of protagonists while reading. In addition, parts of the brain associated with empathy

were continuing to fire at higher rates even 24 hours after reading. This evidence shows long-lasting changes in the brain stemming from reading fictional stories (Masko & Bloem, 2017).

Students with a strong sense of identity and empathy will benefit from a number of positive results that stretch beyond their schooling years, including fewer peer conflicts, deeper friendships with others, higher performance across all academic areas, strengthened mental health in adulthood, and even increased career stability and success (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). In the scope of all the inequity in the world today, this replacement practice proves to be an equity strategy that, through consistent implementation, could impact the students' lives far beyond their classroom years.

**Application: Original Voice Texts for Elementary Classrooms**

The section below provides teachers with books to address specific identity indicators such as: race, cultural group, family structure, and immigration experience. Each text is written by an author whose racial identity matches that of the main character and provides a specific example of a life experience or reflection from that author. The chart also includes standards from the Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework (ABF) that align well for each text (Teaching Tolerance, 2014). These standards are critical for consideration as owning these books is not enough to develop children's positive self-identity. The standards included provide a direction for teachers to lead productive discussion with each text; these standards were chosen specifically to assist in students' identity development. Because of this

goal, most of the standards are from the "Identity" and "Diversity" domains of the ABF framework. The texts are grouped by race, because finding books with people of color is one of the most pressing problems with modern classroom libraries (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). True mirrors and windows are to show that all people have complex and multifaceted identities. Thus, for example, the experience of an Asian author might be a mirror for a Black student or an Indian student. Therefore, teachers should pre-read each text to understand its intricacy beyond race into nationality, socioeconomic status, and feelings.

Table 1

*Children's Books featuring Black Characters*

| Book Title | Description | ABF Standards |
|---|---|---|
| *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes | This book details the excitement a black boy feels about getting a new haircut. It celebrates self-esteem and swagger of young boys in a barbershop. This text utilizes sensory words and emotion language to convey the hallmark of black culture that is a "fresh cut." | ID.K-2.5 (ID.3-5.5) I see that the way my family and I do things is both the same and different from how other people do things, and I am interested in both. |

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| *Thank You, Omu!*<br>By Oge Mora | Everyone in town comes to Omu's house for a serving of her thick red stew! One by one, neighbors, police officers, the hot dog vendor, and many more come knocking for a bowl of her scrumptious stew. Omu's generosity leaves her with little left for herself until all those she fed return to share with her. This story of sharing, kindness, and community is perfect for young learners. | DI.K-2.6 (DI.3-5.6)<br>I like being around people who are like me and different from me, and I can be friendly to everyone. |
| *Hidden Figures*<br>By Margot Lee Shetterly and Laura Freeman | This true story highlights the role four brilliant black female mathematicians played in launching the America's journeys into space. This unbelievable story shifts the lens away from the traditional faces of NASA towards the women who were trusted to run the numbers for them, by hand. | JU.3-5.12 (JU.K-2.12)<br>I know when people are treated unfairly, and I can give examples of prejudice words, pictures, and rules. |

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| *Hair Love*<br>By Matthew Cherry | *Hair Love* shows a young Zuri and her father working to find the perfect hairstyle. While Zuri loves that her hair can do so many different things, she struggles to find the perfect hair style for the day. With a little help from her dad, they try puffs, braids, a pick, and eventually find the perfect style. | ID.K-2.1 (ID.3-5.1)<br>I know and like who I am and can talk about my family and myself and name some of my group identities. |
| *Violet's Music*<br>By Angela Johnson | Violet can't stop making music! As she tries over and over to find someone to play music with her, she starts to realize everyone has different passions. But where are the other kids who love to play music? Violet finds her community by being herself. | ID.3-5.3 (ID.K-2.3)<br>I know that all my group identities are part of who I am, but none of them fully describes me and this is true for other people too. |
| *Max and the Tag-Along Moon*<br>By Floyd Cooper | Max carries the message from his grandpa with him everywhere, "That ol' moon will always shine for you, on and on." Max goes throughout his life and | DI.3-5.9 (DI.K-2.9)<br>I feel connected to other people and know how to talk, work and play with others even when we are |

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| | night after night, looks for the moon to remind him of his grandpa's presence. The moon captures the metaphor of the constancy and comfort of his grandfather's love. | different or when we disagree. |
| *Peter's Chair*<br>By Ezra Jack Keats | Peter's new baby sister isn't quite as exciting for Peter as he might have thought. First, his cradle is painted pink, then they paint his high chair, and before they can paint his chair, Peter takes it with plans to run away with his dog, Willie. However, Peter's plans must change when he realizes he has outgrown his childhood chair. This charming story highlights children's shared feelings of fear. | DI.K-2.7 (DI.3-5.7)<br>I can describe some ways that I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities. |

Table 2

*Children's Books featuring Native American Characters*

| Book Title | Description | ABF Standard |
|---|---|---|
| *Shi-shi-etko*<br>By Nicola Campbell | Shi-shi-etko has four days before she will leave her family to attend school. She gathers memories and lessons from her parents and community before she has to go. Shi-shi-etko prepares to leave her family and takes with her all her family's traditions and stories. | DI.3-5.8 (DI.K-2.8)<br>I want to know more about other people's lives and experiences, and I know how to ask questions respectfully and listen carefully and non-judgmentally. |
| *Jingle Dancer*<br>By Cynthia Leitich Smith | Jenna loves jingle dancing with her ancestors and has a dream to dance in the next powwow, but can't figure out how to get her dress to "sing" like the true jingle dancers. After she commits to dancing in place of her grandmother at the powwow, Jenna begins a hunt for the best jingles to make her dress sing. | DI.K-2.10 (DI.3-5.10)<br>I find it interesting that groups of people believe different things and live their daily lives in different ways. |
| *Crossing Bok Chitto*<br>By Tim Tingle | Bok Chitto is a river that has separated plantation owners | JU.3-5.14 (JU.K-2.14) |

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| | from the indigenous Choctaw peoples for years. The law declared that any enslaved person who crosses Bok Chitto is deemed free. When a young girl finds herself crossing the Bok Chitto to get berries for her mother, she encounters slaves escaping the plantation on the other side. This story of friendship and generosity is one that will inspire deep discussion about power, strength, and fighting for others. | I know that life is easier for some people and harder for others based on who they are and where they were born. |
| *Sky Sisters*<br>By Jan Bourdeau Waboose | Two Ojibway sisters trek through the cold north to find the SkySpirit's midnight dance, the Northern Lights. The younger sister has a hard time being patient in the cold, while her older sister leads the way on their long journey. The sibling relationship Bourdeau Waboose | ID.3-5.5 (ID.K-2.5)<br>I know my family and I do things the same as and different from other people and groups, and I know how to use what I learn from home, school and other |

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| | portrays reminds readers that the most intimate traditions are those we share with people we love. | places that matter to me. |
| *The Good Rainbow Road*<br>By Simon J. Ortiz | In the village of Haapaahnitse at the foot of a mountain, two courageous boys find themselves called to an important mission. Tsaiyah-dzehshi and Hamahshu-dzehshi set west to the home of the Shiwana to ask the Rain and Snow spirits to bring water to their barren village. The brother's journey will take them across mountains and canyons of lava to eventually save their village. | DI.3-5.9 (DI.K-2.9)<br>I feel connected to other people and know how to talk, work and play with others even when we are different or when we disagree. |
| *Sweetest Kulu*<br>By Celina Kalluk | An Inuit mother tells her child of the wonders of his birth and the impact his life has had on their Inuit community. Visitors included animals, tribe members, and arctic weather. Each of these | DI.K-2.7 (DI.3-5.7)<br>I can describe some ways that I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those |

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| | visitors and animal friends brought him a message of kindness or word of advice as he entered the world. This colorful story shows the Inuit values of love and respect to each member of the community. | who have other identities. |
| *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* By Traci Sorell | The Cherokee community says "Otsaliheliga" to give thanks for all the changes they experience in life. This story walks the reader through a variety of changes the community experiences, from a Cherokee New Year, to the loss of loved ones, the Cherokee community finds ways to say "Otsaliheliga" in all seasons. | DI.K-2.6 (DI.3-5.6) I like being around people who are like me and different from me, and I can be friendly to everyone. |
| *Bowwow Powwow* By Brenda J. Child | When Windy Girl and her dog, Itchy Boy, attend their first powwow with her uncle, the jingle dresses, tasty food, and native songs amaze them. | ID.K-2.3 (ID.3-5.3) I know that all my group identities are part of me – but that I am always ALL me. |

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| | Feeling at home, Windy Girl lets her imagination run wild and begins to envision a powwow for dogs. This playful tale speaks to the power of powwow and reminds readers that native peoples bring their own experience to their cultural practice. |

Table 3

*Children's Books featuring Asian Characters*

| Book Title | Description | ABF Standards |
|---|---|---|
| *A Different Pond*<br>By Bao Phi | A Vietnamese boy and his father fish for dinner in America and reflect on the family's move from Vietnam. The fishing trip they embark on now is reminiscent for his father of his homeland, while the son questions his father's actions. Why can't his dad afford food if | JU.3-5.14 (JU.K-2.14)<br>I know that life is easier for some people and harder for others based on who they are and where they were born. |

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| | he has a job he works at every day? Readers explore immigration and cultural preservation in an unforgettable, award-winning story. | |
| *Dim Sum for Everyone*<br>By Grace Lin | This easy-reader book focuses on one of the oldest Chinese dining traditions. Dim Sum trolleys roll prepared food to each table and each family member gets to choose their favorites to share with the table. Pictures and albels of classic Dim Sum offerings make this an interactive book students will love connecting to! | DI.K-2.8 (DI.3-5.8)<br>I want to know about other people and how our lives and experiences are the same and different. |
| *Dear Juno*<br>By Suyung Pak | Juno's grandmother writes letters to him in Korean, but Juno doesn't know how to speak or read Korean. When he can't disturb his parents to read the letter for him, Juno decides to | ID.K-2.3 (ID.3-5.3)<br>I know that all my group identities are part of me – but that I am always ALL me. |

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| | draw a response to his grandmother. Their communication shows that many ideas are universal and the power of family language in bringing us together. | |
| *The Name Jar* By Yangsook Choi | Unhei's Korean grandmother gives her, which used to feel special, but as new kids at school struggle to pronounce her name and teasing starts, Unhei wishes she had a name that sounded like everyone else's. Unhei debates choosing a new American name, like she has seen others do. As Unhei's classmates try to help her choose an American name, Unhei realizes that what makes her different also makes her special. | AC.K-2.16 (AC.3-5.16) I care about those who are treated unfairly. |
| *Cora Cooks Pancit* | Cora gets to be her mother's assistant in the kitchen today | ID.K-2.5 (ID.3-5.5) |

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| By Dorina K. Lazo Gilmore | making her favorite Filipino dish, pancit. Cora usually gets stuck with the kid jobs, while she watches her older siblings get the adult jobs. When her siblings leave the house for a day, Cora jumps on the opportunity to cook with her mom, and this time, she will get to do the adult jobs. Cora and her mother exchange stories of tradition, immigration, and cooking as they make pancit together. | I see that the way my family and I do things is both the same as and different from how other people do things, and I am interested in both. |
| *King for a Day*<br>By Rukhsana Khan | The Pakistani spring festival, Basant, has come and it's the most exciting day of the year. Malik cannot wait to set his special kite, Falcon, free for Basant, but his wheelchair draws the attention of a bully who is competing kites with Malik. Read to find out if | JU.3-5.12 (JU.K-2.12)<br>I know when people are treated unfairly, and I can give examples of prejudice words, pictures and rules. |

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| | Malik's kite will remain superior; will he become king for a day? | |
| *Uncle Peter's Amazing Chinese Wedding* By Lenore Look | Everyone is excited for Uncle Peter's wedding except Jenny. While the family is busy preparing for a traditional Chinese wedding full of good-luck money, multiple dresses for the bride, and the official tea ceremony, Jenny is worried she won't be Uncle Peter's number one girl anymore. In a mischievous series of events, Jenny does everything she can to stop this wedding from happening. | DI.K-2.9 (DI.3-5.9) I know everyone has feelings, and I want to get along with people who are similar to and different from me. |
| *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* By Chieri Uegaki | After three lessons, Hana Hashimoto has signed up to play her violin for the school talent show. Her brothers have little confidence in her, teasing her for her lack of talent. As doubt | ID.3-5.1 (ID.K-2.1) I know and like who I am and can talk about my family and myself and describe our various group identities. |

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| | starts to creep into Hana's mind, she remembers her talented grandfather, or Ojichan, and how beautifully he played when she visited him in Japan. She is determined to practice every day, just as he did. This story of perseverance is an inspiration to kids setting goals anywhere in the world. |

Table 4

*Children's Books featuring South and Central American Characters*

| Book Title | Description | ABF Standards |
|---|---|---|
| *Alma and How She Got Her Name* By Juana Martinez-Neal | Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela is curious about why her name is so long. This touching story reveals the history of each part of Alma's name, from her great-grandmother Esperanza who loved to travel, to her | JU.K-2.11 (JU.3-5.11) I know my friends have many identities, but they are always still just themselves. |

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| | grandfather Jose, an artist. Alma realizes that while her name may be longer than everyone else's, she too will one day have a story to pass on. | |
| *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* By Isable Quintero | Daisy Ramona likes to ride with her Papi on his motorcycle around Los Angeles. As they ride around town together, Daisy and her Papi notice how the community around them has changed. The colorful language lends itself well to teaching inferences and with Spanish phrases thrown in, this book gives our Spanish-speaking students a chance to teach their peers common phrases and words. | ID.3-5.6 (DI.K-2.6) I like knowing people who are like me and different from me, and I treat each person with respect. |
| *Islandborn* By Junot Diaz | In Lola's classroom, everyone is from a different country. When asked to draw a picture of the place where they came from, | ID.K-2.3 (ID.3-5.3) I know that all my group identities are part of me |

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| | Lola is left wondering about the island she came from. In an effort to learn more about the Dominican Republic, Lola begins asking all her family members and neighbors about the island. She is shocked to find that many community members describe it as beautiful, yet none of them want to move back. Why did they come to America? Why can't Lola remember her roots? | – but that I am always ALL me. |
| *Carmela Full of Wishes*<br>By Matt de la Pena | Carmela is finally old enough to go with her brother on her scooter to help him run errands for the family. As they zoom around town together, Carmela and her brother arrive at the Laundromat to wash the family's clothing. Carmela picks a dandelion and struggles to think of the perfect wish. Torn | ID.3-5.5 (ID.K-2.5)<br>I know my family and I do things the same as and different from other people and groups, and I know how to use what I learn from home, school and other places that matter to me. |

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| | between wishes for her mother to get a day off work, for her dad to get his papers to join the family, for her brother to get a new shiny bike, Carmela realizes that all of these wishes are important. | |
| *Along the Tapajos* By Fernando Vilela | Caua and Inae use boats every day to travel along the Tapajos River in Brazil. But when the rainy season comes and the water rises, they must relocate to safer, higher ground. All is well until Caua and Inae realize they left behind Titi, their pet tortoise! Tortises cannot swim like turtles, and the siblings realize they must make difficult decisions that could impact everyone's safety. | DI.3-5.9 (DI.K-2.9) I feel connected to other people and know how to talk, work and play with others even when we are different or when we disagree. |
| *The Field* By Baptiste Paul | In St. Lucia, futbol is the sport that brings the community together. This colorful story | ID.K-2.2 (ID.3-5.2) I can talk about interesting and healthy |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | begins with a simple call, "Vin!" to unite all the soccer playing kids in the community. Friends play against friends and the whole community comes to cheer them on, but a tropical storm rolling in may threaten their game altogether. This creole story uses soccer to teach about teamwork, acceptance, and leadership. | ways that some people who share my group identities live their lives. |
| *Dear Primo: A Letter to my Cousin* By Duncan Tonatiuh | Two cousins, Charlie and Carlitos, write letters back and forth from America and Mexico. The boys trade stories of what they see out their windows, how they get to school, and what they like to play. As the boys compare their lives, it invites the reader to engage in conversations about how one family can have such different life experiences. | DI.K-2.7 (DI.3-5.7) I can describe some ways that I am similar to and different from people who share my identities and those who have other identities. |

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| *Mango, Abuela, and Me*<br>By Meg Medina | Abuela comes from Cuba to stay Mia and her family, but Mia soon realizes communicating might be harder than she originally thought. Mia becomes frustrated that they aren't able to say everything they want to each other. Abuela learns English from Mia, and Mia learns Spanish from her Abuela. As Mia learns more about where her family comes from, she and Abuela embark on a learning adventure that will change both of them forever. | DI.3-5.8 (DI.K-2.8)<br>I want to know more about other people's lives and experiences, and I know how to ask questions respectfully and listen carefully and non-judgmentally. |

**Discussion**

Students flourish and grow as readers when given opportunities to connect with texts (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). When teachers utilize books featuring characters from different races, cultures, experiences, and lifestyles, they are guiding students towards greater self-understanding and identity development. This identity development not only builds empathy in students, but also increases students' interest in reading (Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, & Koehler, 2009). Motivation

is one of the greatest indicators of reading success, which has a deep connection to career success, making this strategy not only inclusive, but equitable (Marinak & Gambrell, 2017; (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017).

Tables 1-4 provide a starting point for teachers to utilize this process. Teachers should start supplementing their classroom libraries with original-voice texts that feature a wide array of characters. Teachers should model connecting and contrasting personal experiences of their own with books they read aloud. The Anti-Bias Framework standards aligned with each book provide teachers a direction to guide conversation around each text. These conversations will help illuminate which books are mirrors and windows for each student and will ultimately shed light on each student's self-image and identity. Elementary literacy coaches should be adapting their curriculum to utilize more diverse texts to reflect not only their students, but also peoples not present in the classroom. Curriculum adjustment is not to be feared; fidelity to the standards and learning objectives is what is important, not necessarily fidelity to the text suggested by the curriculum.

Students have a right to see themselves in their texts and current literature is far too homogeneous. This is not only harmful for students whose identities are absent, but also for the white students who are gathering an overinflated sense of importance. Mirrors and windows enable teachers to be a catalyst for change in equity, social development, and stability not only for their students year to year, but also for communities over time.

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# *The Importance of Utilizing Play to Promote Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Environments*


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## Abstract

There is no question that play is important in the lives of children at home and at school. Unfortunately, the amount of play in early childhood classrooms continues to diminish. Teachers are under pressure to meet high academic expectations so they are spending more time on instruction and testing instead of play. Children enjoy play and it improves many different skills, like literacy. Children develop knowledge of literacy as they engage with print. Therefore, literacy can be developed through different types of play, including well-defined enriched literacy play settings and adult role models. The importance of utilizing play to promote emergent literacy is described. Techniques and that can promote early literacy in early childhood classroom are provided.


*Keywords:* literacy, play, early childhood education

There have been drastic changes in early childhood education over the last few decades. As a result, traditional early childhood classrooms that included play, discovery, art, music, and developing social skills are becoming a thing of the past (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play is being replaced and is now thought of as low importance or even a waste of time (Nicolopolou, 2010). These changes have occurred because many early childhood educators are under great pressure to meet expectations that may be inappropriate for young children, which can result in environments that are not acceptable for their age levels (Miller & Almon, 2009). Moreover, the academic standards that are required for early childhood classrooms are developmentally inappropriate as more time is spent on instruction and testing in literature and math (Nicolopolou, 2010).

Early childhood classrooms should be a place where young children can learn through play (Miller & Almon, 2009). When kindergarten was initially created, it was to be a playful place for students to develop, learn, and grow (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). However, kindergarten is now often five days a week all day long. Kindergarten classrooms are devoting four to six times more time in literacy and math than before with less time in play (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play can improve social skills, self-regulation skills, and mathematics (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Play has also shown to improve oral language development, vocabulary development, comprehension, reading proficiency along with connections to semantic organization and re-telling skills (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Not only does play improve the above skills, play has been found to positively aid in children's progress and growth across the five developmental domains that are: physical, language, social, emotional and cognitive (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). The five

developmental domains influenced by play includes growth in fine and gross motor skills, verbal skills which leads to an increase in vocabulary and language comprehension, social and emotional abilities such as empathy and cooperation, and problem solving and different types of thinking (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

With all of the skills that children can learn from play, it is important to remember that children start learning literacy at a young age. This is a time when children are curious and attempt to make sense of the world through the use of play and many different literacy skills begin to develop (Neuman, 2019). When play is included in early childhood curriculums, it can help develop a sense of identity along with providing children an understanding of their world (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). Children can also learn to make meaning through pretend play, drawing, and conversations with each other. Play aids children to interpret and make sense of reading and writing even before learning the skills that are connected with print (Neuman, 2019).

Play can offer children a valuable background for learning crucial literacy concepts and skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013). Emergent and early literacy skills can start developing through play at school (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). For example, literacy goals can be achieved such as making predictions about writing and reading and then including the literacy information to further learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). Play can also provide experiences in which students are in involved in social routines and skills that can be connected to reading and writing (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). This is important since children discover early in life written language that is developed through both social and cultural worlds (Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

While all of the skills that children can learn in the early childhood years are important, so is the setting and materials included in the classroom. The setting and materials included in the classroom are important as they expose children to different literacy skills as they play. The range of literacy opportunities in play environments and the design of the play environment are both equally important to help encourage literacy learning in the classroom (Neuman and Roskos, 1992). Enriched environments and providing literacy tools are beneficial during play in the classroom (Neuman and Roskos, 1991). There are different ways to include all of the elements needed during play to help students with literacy (Neuman and Roskos, 1992; Neuman and Roskos, 1991; Morrow, 1990; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2002; Neuman, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to encourage educators to include play in early childhood classrooms to help promote literacy and to describe ways that they might do so.

## Play in Early Childhood Classrooms

Throughout the years, there have been theorists who have discussed the relationship between play and literacy. The Piagetian View, from Jean Piaget, explains the mental processes involved in social pretend play that helps develop cognitive skills such as symbolic representation and emerging literacy skills (Christie & Roskos, 2013). The skills that can develop from pretend play include learning related to reading and writing (Tsao, 2008). Piagetian Theory specifies that children will practice and decipher symbols and develop mental resources through play that will aid in written language and comprehension (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Piaget asserted that pretend play is not a "leading activity" but a "following activity" that allows students to practice and combine

any literacy skills that that they have already learned in the classroom (Roskos & Christie, 2013).

The Vygotskian View, from Lee S. Vygotsky, is undergirded by the belief that social interactions between adults and peers can provide opportunities for literacy practices during play (Tsao, 2008). Vygotsky maintained that children need scaffolding from an adult to extend higher levels of learning but when children are active during play, they can develop their own self-help abilities (Roskos & Christie, 2011). He contended that pretend play is a "leading activity" not a "following activity", that creates a zone of proximal development in which aids in developmental change. This developmental change is fundamental to literacy as it helps in the progress for students to learn how to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2013).

**Play Supports Literacy Development**

Educators have been wrestling with the questions of whether play based learning can help promote emergent literacy for many decades (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Whether play based learning has influenced literacy development has been studied and researched over numerous decades (Tsao, 2008). There have been different research studies that suggest that children's play in early childhood years can support their literacy development (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Research has suggested that in a literacy enriched play environment, children can become engaged in reading and writing activities that can be associated with literacy development that can help foster literacy behaviors (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). Children have opportunities to interact literacy concepts, objects, and processes when an environment for play is intentionally developed (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

## Literacy Enriched Play

It is important to include literacy enriched play environments in early childhood classrooms to help support literacy behaviors (Roskos & Christie, 2011).
Play enriched classrooms use familiar literature objects and other familiar contexts to support engagement with literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). This is an effective approach, because when children engage in literacy rich play environments, they have a tendency to read and write during play (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

**Materials.** Literacy enriched play environments include many choices of literacy materials for the children to use. When children have multiple choices of literacy materials in a classroom during play, it can help promote their literacy interactions (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The literacy materials that should be included in the play environment need to help children communicate and practice different reading skills. These literacy materials help develop concepts of print, letter knowledge (names and sounds), word reading and emergent reading (Roskos and Christie, 2013).

**Physical arrangement.** The physical design of the play centers is also important to literacy. It is important for teachers to provide well-designed physical spaces to help support literacy development (Morrow, 1990). The physical design of a play environment should offer many literacy opportunities to students and aid in their development of literacy skills (Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Play spaces that are small, intimate, and well organized have shown to improve play activities and help students stay on task. If the physical play environment is well-designed, play can help develop reading and writing which can lead to literacy engagement (Neuman & Roskos, 1990).

## The Role of the Adult in Play with Learning

Although a literacy enriched and well-designed play environment is vital to students developing literacy skills, there are times when adult involvement and planning is necessary to help ensure that literacy learning is occurring (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018). It is essential that a teacher plays an important role in guiding students in play and being a role model during play (Morrow, 1990). This will allow the students to learn on higher levels than if they are learning on his or her own all of the time (Morrow, 1990). The teacher should act as an observer, participant and trainer. For example, teachers should watch quietly while encouraging students supportively "on the side", become directly involved in the play while gently guiding students towards literacy objects and materials and/or deliberately take steps to plan and model play to teach new or different literacy skills. This approach often inspires and encourages students to learn different literacy skills as they observe a play activity (Roskos and Neuman, 1993). When a teacher is involved during play, children are often more productive and learn specific literacy skills (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018).

Guided play is one form of play where the teacher includes purposeful and directed learning to play activities to meet a specific standard of literacy learning (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Examples of guided play include a teacher creating a literacy-oriented play theme that includes literacy objects that the teacher has deliberately selected. The teacher then models literacy behaviors and "how to" play to guide the students to learn assorted literacy skills that the teacher has developed as a goal (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). Guided play has shown to be beneficial to children's academic learning, including literacy (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018). The teacher should scaffold learning into students play to help learn literacy skills (Pyle, Poliszczuk, &

Danniels, 2018). Some of the literacy skills that can be taught through guided play include phonemic awareness, writing skills, reading, and vocabulary (Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk, 2018).

## Integrating Play into the Classroom

There are different ways to think or identify play-based learning in the classroom. One way is called Free Play or Open-ended Play in which the children are allowed to learn through playful exploration, experimentation and interaction with peers (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). The teacher has little interaction with the students during this type of play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). The activities in Free Play or Open-ended Play are selected by the students and are child guided (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018).

Another type of play-based learning is Modeled Play in which the teacher explains, illustrates and demonstrates different resources or materials to be used during play that will help aid in learning a concept or skill that a teacher has chosen (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). After the teacher has modeled the concept or skill, the teacher will have little interaction during the play time and allow the children to learn from the modeled play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

Another type of play is called Purposefully Framed Play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). This type of play is where the teacher has specific material and resources connected to a specific learning concept that is to be discovered through play-based learning. There is Open-ended Play, Modeled Play and teach-child interactions in this type of play due to the teacher providing materials, modeling how to use the

materials, initiating a discussion and actually participating in the Open-ended play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

The last type of play-based learning is called Guided Play. The teacher has a goal that is linked to the curriculum for the students to learn and has an active role in this type of play-based learning. The teacher scaffolds academic learning throughout the play activities while asking questions and providing feedback. While focusing on the learning goal, the teacher becomes an active coplayer and leader during play. However, the teacher will need to remember to be active in a playful manner during Guided Play (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018).

These types of play-based learning are important since they can provide different opportunities to increase developmental competencies including personal skills, self-regulation skills and social skills along with academic learning that are connected to language and literacy development (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). A balanced approach that can offer all of the types of play, Free Play or Open-ended Play, Modeled Play, Purposefully Framed Play and Guided Play is considered beneficial to literacy learning (Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Therefore, teachers should consider implementing a balanced approach to help promote literacy learning in play environments.

**Designing a Physical Play Setting in the Classroom**

The physical setting in a classroom is important to consider while designing play spaces in the classroom and has been shown to have a substantial influence on the play behaviors of children (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). The play area can have an impact on children's play activities and attitudes if it is set up with the purpose of using it for active

and engaging learning (Morrow, 1990). A teacher should keep in mind that through the design of the classroom, the physical space should be used for thoughtful literacy learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2011).

There are many different features to think of while designing the physical space to support literacy during play. The play area should be a small, intimate space that students can move easily around in to interact and perform different literacy tasks (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Roskos & Neuman, 2011). A distinct play setting that is separate from the main classroom by the use of shelves, carts or dividers is preferred (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Classrooms that are carefully designed with smaller spaces help children become more creative and use more language-related activities along with more explorative behavior, more social interaction and cooperation than in a room that is not carefully designed (Morrow, 1990).

Different play areas can be included in the design such as a post office center, kitchen/restaurant center, office center, doctor office, grocery store and library area for a few examples. These different play areas should be arranged so that the students can shift between different play areas easily while not become easily distracted by other noisy areas, such as the block area or art area. These areas will be discovery areas where students will engage in learning while pretending to be librarians, cooks, postal and office workers and other types of roles associated with the designated play area (Neuman, 2019). These different play areas are designed to help encourage children to become productive and creative in different literacy skills such as reading and writing (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). While students are playing in the different themed areas, they will be interacting with the literacy materials and objects that are included in each area and

having conversations with adults and peers which help develop literacy knowledge (Neuman and Roskos, 1991).

**Creating a Literacy-Enriched Play Setting**

Once the physical design of a play area is organized, it is equally important to include these play areas with a large variety of different literacy resources (Roskos and Christie, 2013). Literacy-enriched play areas can help children develop knowledge that supports learning how to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

**Literacy materials and props**. Each of these play areas should have a supply of literacy materials for both reading and writing that are related to the theme of the play area including literacy props (Christie & Roskos, 2013). The literacy props need to be appropriate, safe, authentic, and serve a function for each themed play area (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). For example, the kitchen/restaurant play area could have different literacy objects such as menus, ordering pads, coupons, cookbooks, employee nametags and pencils (Roskos & Christie, 2002; Roskos & Christie, 2011). The post office could include different props that would be related to mailing a letter such as stationery, envelopes, stamps and pencils. A teacher should add paper to the themed play areas including different types of paper such as lined paper, unlined paper, different designed stationery and different sized notepads.

Different wall signs around the various themed play areas should be added to further expand literacy experiences in the play areas (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Dress-up clothing for each themed play area can be added to encourage children to act out the roles of each area. This can add to authenticity of the play and help develop social interaction to aid in collaborative literacy learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). The themed play area

needs to be safe. Do not include things with sharp points or anything that could cause injuries (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). All of these different types of literacy props are used to help support and prompt children's literacy connections. These types of literacy objects need to be realistic to the play area and aid to the development of literacy behaviors and learning (Roskos & Christie, 2002). Literacy becomes interactive and part of the play flow through the use of these literacy props and themed play areas (Neuman and Roskos, 1990).

While adding literacy materials to the play area, you should include materials that give students opportunities to practice different reading and writing readiness skills. These skills include concepts about print, letter knowledge (letter names and sounds), word reading, emergent writing, vocabulary, and language comprehension (Roskos & Christie, 2013; Miller & Almon, 2009). Using different literacy-enriched play areas, students can gain knowledge about functions about writing, recognize play-related print and know how to use different comprehension strategies including self-checking and self-correction (Christie and Roskos, 2013). Researchers have also found that through the use of play other skills can develop in children such as verbalization, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation which are all valuable skills to aid in literacy learning (Miller & Almon, 2009).

**The Teacher's Role**

Once the physical play setting is organized and includes an abundant amount of literacy resources and props, the teacher should determine what their role is in the play environment. A teacher plays a vital role in guiding students during play in the classroom and although a literacy enriched play environment is significant for learning, teacher involvement and interaction is also significant in play-based learning (Morrow, 1990; Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Teachers' beliefs in the role that play can affect learning in the classroom will influence how they apply play in their classrooms (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). If a teacher believes that play can help support and develop academic learning, the teacher will become more involved in their role to include play in the classroom using the different types of play to learn different skills in reading and writing (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018). A teacher can significantly influence students' development of literacy behaviors and skills (Roskos & Neuman, 1993) by providing the necessary materials and interactive feedback.

A teacher should be an observer and encourager of literacy play (Tsao, 2008). A teacher should also demonstrate a variety of literacy practices to help develop meaning to students' reading and writing (Neuman and Roskos, 1990). A teacher needs to make sure to schedule enough time for children to play in order to develop literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2002).

**The Onlooker**. Teachers can take on different literacy-assisting roles during play-based learning. One role is called The Onlooker (Roskos & Neuman, 1993). The teacher remains outside of the play area and oversees how the children are playing while intermittently responding nonverbally and verbally to children's literacy efforts during

play. The teacher is supporting literacy-related play while giving positive and supporting responses to the students about their reading and writing learning experiences (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

**The Player**. Another role that a teacher can take on is as The Player. The teacher is directly involved with the children in the literacy-related play becoming an active participant and member of the play experiences. In this role, the teacher will need to communicate interest in playing and ask to play right along with the students. During play the teacher will persuade students to use literacy objects and materials while encouraging children's self-expression along with encouragement to continue to with their literacy-related play (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

**The Leader**. The last role for a teacher is The Leader. As The Leader, a teacher plans how to implement different literacy props and arrange the play environment for a specific literacy enriched play theme. The teacher is directly involved in the play, models how to play and is actually teaching literacy-related concepts. This role can be compared to being "a coach" which entails demonstrating, giving exact directions and encouraging learning different skills. All of these roles are important in a literacy-enriched play environment due to the influence that teachers have on children's literacy-related play (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

## The Future of Play to Promote Early Literacy

Incorporating play in early childhood classrooms to help promote literacy and to give teachers some resources and ideas of how this can be accomplished is important, because children start learning through play at a young age. Play influences children's academic development while allowing children to discover themselves and the world

around them (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). With play, children can start to develop literacy skills earlier in their early childhood school years. Students who develop these literacy skills earlier often have better success in academic learning in the early years and later in school (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Play has been shown to improve a large range of skills in literacy and in other areas as well. These skills can include, oral language development, vocabulary development, comprehension, reading proficiency along with connections to semantic organization, re-telling skills, social skills, self-regulation skills and mathematics (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018; Pyle, Poliszczuk, & Danniels, 2018). Play has also been shown to aid in children's progress and growth across the five domains of learning that are: physical, language, social, emotional and cognitive (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018).

Since there is such a large range of skills that can be developed and improved through play, it is vital that teachers incorporate different resources and strategies in the classroom for play to help with literacy. The classroom environment can be a challenge for teachers to create but a well-designed classroom space can help promote learning (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). The physical setting in a classroom has been shown to have a substantial influence on the play behaviors of children (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). The play areas should be well-defined with smaller spaces that are separate from the main classroom (Roskos and Christie, 2011). The different play areas can be centered around different themes that allow the students to pretend, discover and engage in learning during play (Neuman, 2019). The play areas should be equipped with a large variety of literacy-enriched resources (Roskos & Christie, 2013). Included in these resources are literacy props that aid to the authenticity of play and encourage children to act out the

roles of each themed area (Roskos & Christie, 2011). These literacy props are used to help support and encourage children's literacy development (Roskos & Christie, 2002).

Although the classroom environment, physical setting and resources in play areas are important, so is the teacher's role in play. A teacher has a significant role in supporting all of the needs of the students during their play times in the classroom. A teacher has different roles that support and help students develop literacy skills including being an Onlooker, Player and Leader. All of these roles are important in literacy-enriched play environments to help students develop a variety of literacy skills (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

Although there has been research that has shown the benefits of including play in the classroom to help promote literacy, early childhood educators are under great pressure to meet expectations that are inappropriate for young children so they struggle to find the time and resources to promote play in the classroom (Miller & Almon, 2009). Play is being replaced and is becoming a thing of the past (Nicolopolou, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). There needs to be a change in early childhood classrooms across the country. Children are born to learn through play. We need to return to having early childhood classrooms be a place where children can learn, develop and grow through play.

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